

Civil Society: Informed citizens' groups effectively contribute to more responsive government

The independent, non-governmental realm of citizen activity is termed civil society. As the nexus for participation in governance, civil society is essential in a democracy for political expression and influencing government policy choices. In the broadest sense, all support to NGOs, be they agricultural cooperatives, women's health care associations, or business associations, can be considered support for civil society development. Hopefully, in the long term, such support will help build the broad base for democratic development. However, given the scarcity of funding for democracy programs, USAID has chosen to target democracy funding to organizations that enter the public policy arena, the so-called "politically active" or advocacy CSOs, media support, and labor.

The Agency supports CSOs whose advocacy efforts give voice to citizens and expand their influence on the political process. Strengthening civil society is increasingly seen as a way to counterbalance the exercise of excessive authority by governments and economic and political elites, and as a way to encourage more open dialogue about public policy matters too often decided behind closed doors. A vibrant civil society can even provide recourse to justice through the work of human rights groups, especially in post-conflict situations.

To design civil society development strategies, the Center first identifies the major DG issues in a country, then assesses the prospects for the development of reform agendas addressing those issues. The role of civil society becomes important in advancing the reform agenda through advocacy: informing public opinion, mobilizing constituencies and coalitions for reform, and engaging government and political parties in policy debate.

Leading CSO candidates are human rights and pro-democracy groups, professional associations, religious institutions, labor unions, and think tanks. A critical component of any civil society strategy would include a focus on enhancing a free and independent media. Often, service delivery-oriented NGOs become active in civic or political affairs on policy issues of special interest to them or in times of national crisis.

As the Center sees it, USAID's efforts to strengthen civil society are organized into five focus areas: creating a legal framework (often called an enabling environment) to protect and promote freedom of association and expression; increasing citizen participation in the policy process; increasing the financial viability of CSOs; enhancing the free flow of information, especially through support for independent media; and promoting democratic political culture. Trade and industry associations are becoming more active in pressing for good governance as part of democratization, while religious organizations and labor unions have long been at the forefront of campaigns for human rights and social reform. G/DG is also interested in the role of civil society constituencies as participants in economic reform.

The Center makes a distinction between programming which supports civil society writ large, and civil society programming which fits into a democracy strategy. The focus is not how to encourage the growth of CSOs for their own good, but how to encourage elements of civil society to play a role in promoting certain kinds of democratic change. Similarly, USAID has undertaken civic education programming around the world on the assumption that democracy requires citizen participation and participation requires knowledge about one's rights and responsibilities. Research initiated by G/DG suggests that civic education programs must be linked to tangible opportunities for participation, not just theoretical lessons in democracy.

1. Program Status

Strengthening civil society continued to receive a high degree of interest within and outside of USAID. Last year, World Trade Organization fora and initiatives such as "no sweat" propelled worker rights issues up the development agenda, and the Center actively participated in USAID's policy and

programmatic response. G/DG continued its involvement in media development, which is part of the G8 initiative and is of increased interest to international financial institutions. The Center also provided critical support to key countries including **Indonesia**, **Kosovo**, **Nigeria**, **Ukraine** and progressed on completing civil society and civic education assessments.

2. Statement of Purpose

The capacity of civil society organizations to effectively advocate on behalf of political reform is a key element in contributing to successful democratic transitions. Slightly more than one-third of all appropriated resources requested by USAID for DG promotion is likely to be expended in support of civil society programs. USAID Missions with civil society objectives now number 66.

The Center develops, evaluates, and disseminates new and improved strategic approaches and methodologies for supporting civil society. The program addresses the legal and regulatory environment for NGOs, labor, and the media; institutional capacity-building; effective advocacy techniques; and strengthening of democratic political culture through education of citizens on rights and responsibilities in a democracy. G/DG's work in the civil society area is carried out through the design of new implementing mechanisms, development of new technical leadership materials, assistance to missions in carrying out DG assessments and designing programming strategies, and provision of other field support.

3. Key Results

Foreign Policy. The Center provided technical assistance in the civil society area to three of the USG's four democracy priority countries. It also supported USG initiatives on working conditions and labor standards, and on raising awareness of press freedom issues.

- G/DG has been actively supporting Clinton Administration efforts to launch a \$4 million global anti-sweatshop initiative. As the developing countries begin to compete in the global economy, they often define their competitive advantage as inexpensive labor, enticing large multi-national corporations to replace existing relationships with suppliers in countries with better working conditions and pay with new ones which rely upon exploitative working conditions, initiating a global race to the bottom. The anti-sweatshop initiative is intended to address this problem through its focus on the improvement of working conditions in developing country factories that produce goods for the U.S. consumer market. The Center has been instrumental in shaping the policy objectives, program content, and identifying country candidates for targeted intervention.
- G/DG has also been actively engaged in the administration's commitment to the adoption and implementation of core labor standards around the world, within the trade arena, in technical assistance to developing countries, in coordination of activities with Labor, and in the examination of the labor diplomacy program by the secretary of state.
- The **Indonesia** mission received assistance in designing a DG strategy for the pre-election period and G/DG participated in an inter-agency team to design a post-election DG strategy, all of which featured a major emphasis on strengthening civil society. The Center provided field support to the **Ukraine** mission leading up to the October 1999 presidential election, and is providing ongoing technical support on civil society programming to mission assessment teams. G/DG participated in an inter-agency team in the design of the DG strategy for **Nigeria** and assisted the **Kosovo** mission in developing a broad-based DG strategy that includes civil society strengthening.

Technical Expertise. The Center shared its technical expertise in the civil society area through design, production, and dissemination of technical publications, and workshops. USAID staff and a larger audience of partners, donors, and individual academics and practitioners equally benefited from this effort.

- The Center launched a civil society strategy assessment exercise designed to update the general guidance last issued in *Constituencies for Reform*, which was published by PPC/CDIE in 1996 and reflected experience of the early 1990s. The Agency has by now accumulated a much richer and more extensive experience in this vital area, and needs to re-examine its strategic approach to civil society, modifying and amending where needed. To date, G/DG has conducted field studies in **Bolivia, El Salvador, and Mozambique** and anticipates undertaking studies in three more countries. The findings from this work will be combined with those stemming from earlier studies in the E&E and LAC regions to produce a synthesis report laying out G/DG's strategic thinking on civil society assistance for the coming decade.
- G/DG's assessment of civic education impact, begun in FY 1998, finished its final country study in **South Africa**, which largely confirmed earlier findings from the **Dominican Republic and Poland**. All three studies found that civic education initiatives can have some impact on participation, but less on democratic competence and values, implying that future programs should focus on situations where training can link to involvement in political activity. A synthesis report will be forthcoming.
- The Center convened a meeting of civil society representatives in the LAC region to examine the role of organized labor at the intersection of USAID's economic growth and DG activities. This workshop, combined with the results of a similar meeting in Washington, DC and field studies in Asia and Africa, will contribute to the development of a technical publication on incorporating organized labor in development strategies for consolidating democracies and sustaining long-term economic growth.
- For the 1999 DG Officers Training Workshop, G/DG staff organized training on advocacy and media support strategy, and led training on civil society strategies and on labor. A session on civil society strategies assessment at the 1999 DG Partners Conference provided a forum for Center to elicit feedback from its partners on the assessment.
- As part of its Technical Publication Series, G/DG published *The Role of Media in Democracy: A Strategic Approach*. It used the document to assist USAID Missions in making informed decisions with regard to programming in media development activities. The Center also is facilitating communication between media development professionals, USG, and international financial institutions to assign a higher priority to press freedom in the context of economic growth and democratic development.
- G/DG contributed to the publication of E&E Bureau's *Lessons in Implementation*. As part of this exercise, Center staff participated in civil society assessments of USAID programming in **Poland, Russia, and Ukraine**. Center staff participated and presented at a meeting of the Democracy Network and NGO development program directors in Budapest.

Field Support. In addition to those missions mentioned above, G/DG staff was directly involved, both in the field and from Washington, in assisting missions in the development of DG strategies and the assessment of the civil society environment.

- The Center participated on a civil society assessment team for the **Central Asian Republics** mission. The team made specific recommendations for programmatic adjustments, and has been providing comments on the mission's new overall DG strategy. The Center directly assisted the **Zimbabwe** mission in the design of its DG country strategy. Civil society in Zimbabwe was also bolstered through G/DG financial support, through CEPPS, to the Legal Resources Foundation, a local NGO that has been at the forefront of the human rights struggle.
- Center IQCs provided rapid-response technical expertise to support civil society programs of missions and regional bureaus. This included developing guidelines for media coverage of the **Palestine** Legislative Council and for the production, use, and distribution of the council's own

video and audio recordings in order to ensure maximum transparency of council operation. The implementing mechanisms were also used to increase the contacts among 750 **Malian** local community organizations and NGOs, federations, and associations; to design and implement a policy advocacy training program for **Salvadoran** NGOs; to improve financial management systems of NGOs in the **West Bank/Gaza**; and, in **Bolivia**, to conduct an assessment of the capacity of civil society organizations for a program in advocacy training. In **DROC**, Center mechanisms supported struggling Congolese civil society organizations by providing access to information, training, and international networks through an independent resource center. Some 100 people visit the center each day, facilitating internal dialogue.

Program Management/Direct Development Impact. A new cooperative agreement will institutionalize arrangements with one or more partners at the central level to build capacity within the partnering organization and to facilitate bi-lateral mission access to leading organizations with experience in building and supporting civic advocacy organizations. New civil society IQCs have been awarded.

G/DG is in the fourth year of a five-year, \$60 million grant to the American Center for International Labor Solidarity (Solidarity Center) to support organized labor's participation in the advancement of democratic governance and economic growth in more than 32 countries. The Solidarity Center conducted 924 separate programs involving the participation of 126,842 workers. Programs range from civic education and women's empowerment to economic restructuring and HIV/AIDS prevention. In addition, the Solidarity Center trained 11,000 workers to become paralegals, negotiators, media specialists, researchers, and election monitors. Another 33,000 workers participated in education programs ranging from basic literacy and economics to advanced courses in trade agreements and labor law. Finally, another 10,000 workers availed themselves of social safety net services provided by trade unions.

- Working in partnership with the **Malawi** Congress of Trade Unions, the Solidarity Center is building the first comprehensive database of child labor statistics in the country. Concurrently, the Center has developed a national network of unions, religious leaders, NGOs, and other representatives of civil society to plan a series of strategic planning workshops for building support for enforcement of national laws and providing new educational opportunities for child laborers.
- The recent national election in **Croatia** marked the first time that the trade union movement took an active role in the political election process. For example, the Union of Autonomous Trade Unions of Croatia launched a comprehensive campaign to spur its members to go to the polls and to vote, with activities including local radio ads, town hall meetings, and printed education materials. These activities were prominently featured in the media and the publicity was overwhelmingly positive and the election was generally deemed a success.
- A Center- and mission-funded program with the Solidarity Center encouraged the active participation of civil society in **Indonesia's** first democratic election in 44 years. Labor organizations played a crucial role in educating the general populace on electoral processes and voter rights, training and mobilizing more than 600,000 volunteers to monitor polls on election day, utilizing the mass media to raise awareness, and encouraging public participation in the formulation of new legislation.
- G/DG funding has supported the establishment of three schools for former child laborers or the children of garment workers in **Bangladesh**. These schools annually enroll 110 students, who range in age from 10-14, and provide an opportunity for literacy, education, and enhanced future employment potential that would otherwise be unavailable. In addition, the schools offer access to the parents, who are in turn educated by their children and by the staff, who meet with them regularly to discuss the children's progress and other issues such as civic education and women's rights.

- In the LAC region, Center partners have been instrumental in defining the agenda for emerging trade discussions, and in creating an understanding of the relationship between core labor standards and democratic economic development. With core funding from G/DG, the Solidarity Center is working to ensure the inclusion of worker rights and labor standards provisions in trade agreements throughout the Americas. Center-funded activities have included deepening the understanding of economic integration by union members and leaders, facilitating discussions among the diverse representatives of civil society, sponsoring strategy sessions, and developing technical, statistical, and educational materials.

4. *Performance and Prospects*

The Center made considerable progress in achieving its targets for the past year. Civil society IQCs were rebid and awarded, and applications in response to a request for proposals are expected by August 1, 2000. Field studies were completed and a paper drafted on lessons learned about civil society participation in economic reform in Africa. As a result of a G/DG grant, the Nation Institute drafted guidance on the legal and institutional requirements for supporting a free and independent media. An inventory and field assessments of USAID and other donor investments were completed, and assessments of USAID state-of-the-art strategies in civil society support were initiated. Two grants were awarded to the International Labor Rights Fund (funded by the Center, the LAC Bureau, and State/DRL) and to the newly established Fair Labor Association, which is a White House initiative funded through State/DRL.

Further progress was constrained by several unanticipated events. Except for the senior civil society technical advisor, this past year saw complete turnover of staff in this subject area. Thus, completion of some planned activities was delayed as considerable effort was exercised in recruiting and orienting new team members. The increased number of labor grants along with the demands on the Center's labor advisor to participate in Agency and inter-agency policy fora on international issues, served to slow work on other aspects of the Center's plans in the labor portfolio. Finally, developments in **Indonesia** required G/DG to reconfigure its priorities in the civil society area during this fiscal year. As a result, more attention was targeted toward direct field support to a mission considered a foreign policy priority by USG.

In 2001, the completion of a number of technical and strategic guidance papers will result in their publication and dissemination to USAID Missions, partners, and other donors. These will include a strategic framework for better integration of labor programs into donor program priorities; technical guidance on the design of advocacy support programs for NGOs; a paper on the minimum legal standards for free media; technical guidance on the design of civic education programs; strategic guidance on the design of civil society programs; and lessons learned in supporting civil society participation in economic reform. Dissemination of these publications will include training workshops in 2001-02 for USAID DG officers and partner organizations; seminars and conferences with other donors; and technical assistance from the Center in the design of mission strategies in these topic areas.

Increasing emphasis is likely to be placed on building and broadening coalitions among civil society organizations to define common agendas and draw in sectors of civil society that frequently have not been involved in such alliances. More attention will be directed at encouraging the participation of labor unions and professional associations in reform coalitions.

5. *Principal Contractors, Grantees, or Agencies*

The Center's civil society implementing mechanisms comprise three grants and a cooperative agreement. Grantees are the American Center for International Labor Solidarity (Solidarity Center), the International Labor Rights Fund, and the Nation Institute. The cooperative agreement is with the Fair Labor Association. New IQC partners are Management Systems International (MSI) and Creative Associates International, Inc. Center-managed IQCs with MSI and World Learning were completed during the fiscal year.